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Since 1985 when the Selective Early Retirement Board (SERB) was established as a drawdown tool for senior officers, little attention has been given to the effects of early retirement on the individuals or the organization. This paper describes the problems and issues related to mandatory retirement. SERB eligible officers expressed strong reactions to the SERB which were categorized as gut level reactions, reality testing, or philosophy. Potential long term effects on the Army were addressed.

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HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF THE SERB

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## HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF THE SERB

Mandatory retirement is the endpoint of a career. Officers selected for mandatory retirement are forced to leave active military service before they wanted to. You may ask yourself, so what's the problem? They receive full retirement benefits, unlike those separated from service prior to retirement. If you found yourself agreeing with that statement, you're not unlike many others. Little attention has been given to the effects of mandatory retirement on the individuals selected and on the Army. Organizational recognition of the problems and issues for these career soldiers is warranted.

How do officers feel about the Selective Early Retirement Board (SERB) and do they think it will have long term effects on the Army? These were the questions asked in interviews with 14 battalion and brigade commanders as a part of a larger study on the effects of downsizing. All expressed strong feelings about the SERB which they indicated were associated with whether they were reviewed or selected by the Board.

### UNDERSTANDING THE SERB

The SERB was established in 1985 as tool for reducing the number of senior officers and bringing it into alignment with the smaller force structure. Officers must be retirement eligible with 20 or more years of service and not have been promoted in the last year to meet the eligibility requirements for the SERB. Each board may select up to 30% of the eligible officers. The

majority of eligible officers are lieutenant colonels and colonels, however, a subgroup of majors and captains with prior enlisted service are also eligible. All eligible officers are reviewed by the SERB on a yearly basis. Since 1985 3,551 officers have been selected for mandatory retirement by the SERB (Personal communication with Officer Division Directorate, 1993).

The necessity of the SERB or some other tool to reduce the number of senior grade officers and bring it into alignment with the rest of the Army is recognized, what has been lacking is an understanding of the human dimensions of the SERB which this study addresses.

Forced retirement is one of the harsh realities of the downsizing of the military. One of the goals of the downsizing is to maintain or improve the current quality of leadership, training, and performance. Decreased morale, rising job insecurity, and increased feelings of helplessness threaten the attainment of this goal.

#### HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF THE SERB

At the same time these commanders understood and supported the reasons for the SERB, most expressed strong reactions and feelings about what was happening. Their expressions were categorized as gut level reaction, reality, or philosophy.

What was apparent in the interviews was that organizational recognition of the human impact of the SERB was lacking. These commanders were concerned. They reported that there was a great

deal of talk among the cohort of officers affected by the SERB, but little discussion or recognition by the organization.

#### GUT LEVEL REACTION

One battalion commander adamantly described his feelings, "The SERB stinks." This description characterized how many of the other commanders felt. Resentment, anger, and frustration were commonly expressed feelings, especially by those reviewed or selected by the SERB.

Several commanders talked about how they had "grown up" under the old system where once you made colonel you could stay for 30 years. Making colonel meant you had made "it." You were in a position of power and could make things happen. Now that was no longer true. The rules had changed, again. A few thought the SERB was a breach of contract. Sad and hurts were other words used to describe the SERB.

Those not yet eligible for the SERB and some who believed that they wouldn't be SERBed tended to have less negative reactions. A common feeling by this group was that the SERB was needed to eliminate the "dead wood" and open up opportunities for juniors. There was a perception that there were officers who were "retired on active duty" just waiting to reach the next pay raise and deserved to be SERBed. Some officers didn't deserve it and were unfortunate, but that's part of the system. Words used to describe the SERB included necessary and welcome.

#### REALITY

Following the expression of different gut level reactions to

the SERB, most expressed similar feelings about the frustration, ambiguity, reality and pain associated with the SERB. It no longer mattered whether or not they were SERB reviewed or selected. Two comments in particular summarized the commanders feelings.

"Retirement used to be a happy day. Now its sad. Everyone feels uncomfortable. No one knows what to say or do".

"Mandatory retirement is a blow psychologically, emotionally, and sometimes financially".

Although the SERB forces officers out, none are separated without full retirement benefits. This was acknowledged by those interviewed as more humane and better than a Reduction in Force (RIF) which would force soldiers out without the benefits of retirement, "A SERB is much easier than a RIF for the entire force". The downside of the SERB is that the people who remain can feel vulnerable, threatened and helpless which does not facilitate morale or performance.

These commanders were frustrated by the SERB policy as expressed by one commander, "I don't know how to end it differently, when senior officers won't elect to retire on their own and open up opportunities for others." Recognition of the need of the SERB, did not dampen the desire to preserve job security, positions, and opportunities for themselves and the future.

One theme that was echoed through the interviews was individual control over the decision to stay or leave military service.

"I'm not going to have the Army tell me it doesn't need me anymore. I'm going to make that decision myself".

The need for control has both positive and negative implications. On an individual level, it is healthier to feel and exert control over decisions that affect your life, than it is to feel helpless and do nothing. The threat of mandatory retirement encourages eligible officers to be proactive and plan for their retirement. Organizationally, the SERB may generate a high level of negativity among senior officers and more may elect to retire than expected.

In addition to control over the decision to stay or leave military service, these commanders were concerned about the ambiguity of the SERB. The repetitive, yearly evaluation of eligible officers generates a high level of ambiguity in the lives of these officers.

"Why take another job, relocate, sell your house, and uproot your family, if in less than a year you may be forced to retire. You could be thousands of miles away from home and not in a position to search for a civilian job".

Under the present yearly review policy most, if not all, field grade officers will eventually become SERB eligible. Positive feelings currently expressed about the SERB may

evaporate as more and more officers become SERB eligible and are forced to retire.

These commanders wanted recognition by the organization of the pain associated with forced retirement and guidance about how to cope with the process. Regular retirement is traditionally celebrated with ceremonies and farewell parties. Individuals forced to retire don't usually want much celebration and exit quietly, leaving everyone feeling uncomfortable.

#### PHILOSOPHY

How these commanders felt and coped with the SERB, depended in part or was guided by their philosophy of life in the Army. Three different types of philosophies were given by the commanders.

"We have to do one thing. Go to war and achieve identified political objectives. This is a public service organization. If the public decides it doesn't need or want the service, then it should go away. SERBed officers shouldn't take it personally. They're not eliminating the person, they're reducing the size of the force".

Commanders who had this kind of philosophy about life in the Army were able to put the SERB into perspective. They depersonalized the SERB and saw it as a necessary organizational tool or at least necessary from the organization's perspective and within the legitimate power of the organization.

"You need to have perspective. Have goals. Have contingency plans. You need a "spot on the wall" to focus



on. When you're a CPT you should be focused on making MAJ, but if you don't make that promotion, you need a plan for what you will do. The same thing applies when you're up for promotion to LTC, COL, or even GEN or when you're evaluated for command jobs. You need alternatives, contingency plans. What are you going to do if this doesn't work out. Protect yourself and your family. You still have to keep that "spot on the wall", that goal of promotion or whatever and work hard and do the best you possibly can do. Give it your all and don't beat yourself up if it doesn't happen. Sometimes what happens has nothing to do with you or your qualifications, its just timing or chance".

This self-preservation or contingency planning philosophy, helped protect commanders psychologically from the negative impact of the SERB. The message was, if you plan for success as well as failure (for whatever reason), you won't get caught unprepared and suffer.

"Army breeds failure. Fail to move up, time to go".

"Life is not fair nor is the Army."

Commanders with negative philosophies appeared to be less willing or able to cope positively or effectively with the SERB. The negative philosophies may be the direct result of the officer being SERB selected or reviewed.

#### LONG TERM EFFECTS

These commanders speculated about possible future effects of the SERB for the Army. The effects have both positive and negative aspects.

On the positive side, the SERB is a mechanism that can guarantee promotion opportunities by eliminating stagnation at

the senior level. Timely promotions may increase junior officer propensity to stay. The threat of mandatory retirement may encourage more proactive planning for life after the Army.

On the negative side, increased officer retention resulting from enhanced promotion opportunities may create a requirement for the continuation of the SERB. Positive feelings about the SERB may evaporate as officers become eligible and be replaced by a sense of powerlessness and resentment. Lack of security and other negative feelings may be communicated and felt throughout the organization which is a threat to morale. The yearly review by the SERB generates ambiguity that may contribute to feelings of insecurity and eligible officers may avoid relocation and new assignments.

Army policy makers face the challenging task of determining the optimum mix of benefits to retain the targeted number of officers and a separation system that is perceived as fair and does not entice more than the desired number of people to leave or creates an environment that fosters helplessness or resentment.

The necessity of the SERB or some other tool to reduce the number of senior grade officers is recognized, what was lacking is an understanding or recognition of the human dimensions of the SERB. Frustration, resentment, anger, rising job insecurity, and increase feelings of helplessness are how some people are feeling as a result of the SERB and these feeling, unchecked, may threaten the quality of the future force.